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David Johansen, Who Fronted the New York Dolls and More, Dies at 75

In the 1970s, he and the transgressive Dolls were proto-punk pioneers. He later refashioned himself as the pompadoured lounge lizard Buster Poindexter.

The singer David Johansen in 2004. He was prolific in multiple genres, but his 1970s heyday with the New York Dolls had the most cultural impact. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

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By Gavin Edwards

Published March 1, 2025 Updated March 3, 2025, 11:41 a.m. ET

David Johansen, the singer and songwriter who was at the vanguard of glam rock and punk as the frontman of the New York Dolls, died yesterday at his home on Staten Island. He was 75.

His death was confirmed by his stepdaughter, Leah Hennessey.

Mr. Johansen revealed last month that he was suffering from Stage 4 cancer, a brain tumor and a broken back. He announced a fund-raising campaign through the Sweet Relief Musicians Fund to assist with his medical bills, saying, “I’ve never been one to ask for help, but this is an emergency.”

Mr. Johansen was prolific in multiple genres, from blues to calypso, and achieved his greatest commercial success in the late 1980s and early ’90s with his pompadoured lounge-lizard alter ego, Buster Poindexter. But his 1970s heyday with the New York Dolls, a band of lipstick-smeared men in love with trashy riffs and tough women, had the most cultural impact, inspiring numerous punk, heavy metal and alternative musicians.

One of those musicians was the singer-songwriter Morrissey of the Smiths, who first witnessed the band as a 13-year-old living in Manchester, England. It was 1973, and the BBC was broadcasting a Dolls show. As the young Morrissey watched the Dolls flail through "Jet Boy," he had what he called his "first real emotional experience," according to Nina Antonia's 1998 book, "The New York Dolls: Too Much Too Soon." Morrissey soon became the president of the band's British fan club.

The New York Dolls were notorious for transgressive behavior; they were especially notorious for cross-dressing. "Before going onstage, the Dolls pass around a Max Factor lipstick the way some bands pass around a joint," Ed McCormack wrote in Rolling Stone in 1972.

"We used to wear some really outrageous clothes," Mr. Johansen said in the prologue to the 1987 music video for Buster Poindexter's hit song "Hot Hot Hot." He added, playing on the name of the genre, "These heavy mental bands in L.A. don't have the market cornered on wearing their mothers' clothes."

Mr. Johansen, foreground, backstage with the New York Dolls in 1972, from left: Billy Murcia, Johnny Thunders, Arthur Kane and Sylvain Sylvain. P. Felix/Daily Express — Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

Musical polish and professionalism weren't the Dolls' strong suit — bassist Arthur Kane sometimes played multiple songs without

remembering to plug in. But they compensated with swagger, shock value and songwriting, performing indelibly fast and loud anthems about trash, outer-borough outcasts and falling in love with Frankenstein.

“If I’m acting like a king,” Mr. Johansen sang, “well, that’s ’cause I’m a human being.”

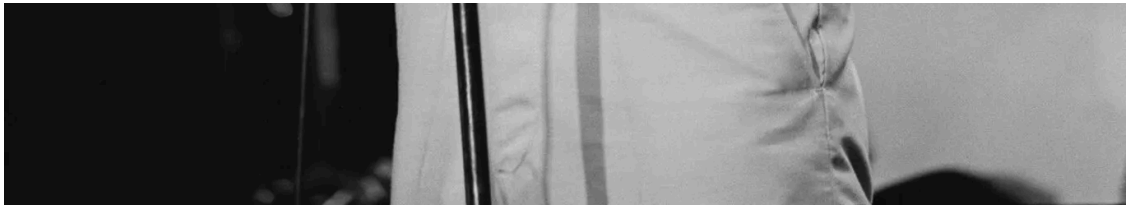
“David had a bit of the vaudevillian in him,” Lenny Kaye of the Patti Smith Group said in a 2023 interview for this obituary. “He was a carnival barker, and he wasn’t afraid to be the center of attention.”

David Johansen: 15 Essential Songs
March 1, 2025

David Roger Johansen was born on Jan. 9, 1950, on Staten Island, the third of six children. His mother, Helen (Cullen) Johansen, was a librarian; his father, Gunvold Johansen, was a life insurance salesman who had been an opera singer in Norway.

Around 1964, Mr. Johansen left St. Peter’s Boys School. By his own account, he was expelled: “They just realized I was not the right person for them,” he told Will Hermes for his 2011 book, “Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music

Forever." He finished his education at Port Richmond High School, graduating in 1967.



Mr. Johansen in performance in 1978. After the demise of the Dolls, he released five solo albums between 1978 and 1984. Michael Putland/Getty Images

After graduation, Mr. Johansen fell in with the New York City hipster scenes centered on Andy Warhol's Factory, the nightclub Max's Kansas City and Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater Company.

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The teenage Mr. Johansen did sound and lights for Mr. Ludlam, and appeared as an extra in some performances. "Charles taught me a lot about making a show and making a spectacle," he told the online magazine Perfect Sound Forever in 2007.

He employed those lessons at maximum volume when he joined the New York Dolls. "Musically, we wanted to bring back stuff with that Little Richard punch to it," he told The New York Times in 2006.

Editors' Picks

The highbrow Mercer Arts Center booked the Dolls for a Tuesday-night residency in its Oscar Wilde Room because it wanted to boost the bar receipts. “At first there were 10 or 20 people, and then 30, and then word spread,” Mr. Kaye said. “All of a sudden there was a scene.”

The band, with a lineup of Mr. Johansen, Mr. Kane, the drummer Billy Murcia and the guitarists Johnny Thunders and Sylvain Sylvain, toured England in 1972. But tragedy struck when Mr. Murcia overdosed and drowned in a bathtub. (Drug addiction would hobble the band throughout its brief career.) When they returned to the United States, they recruited Jerry Nolan as a replacement and signed with Mercury Records.

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Mr. Johansen and Johnny Thunders of the New York Dolls in an early television performance in 1973. Richard Creamer, via Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

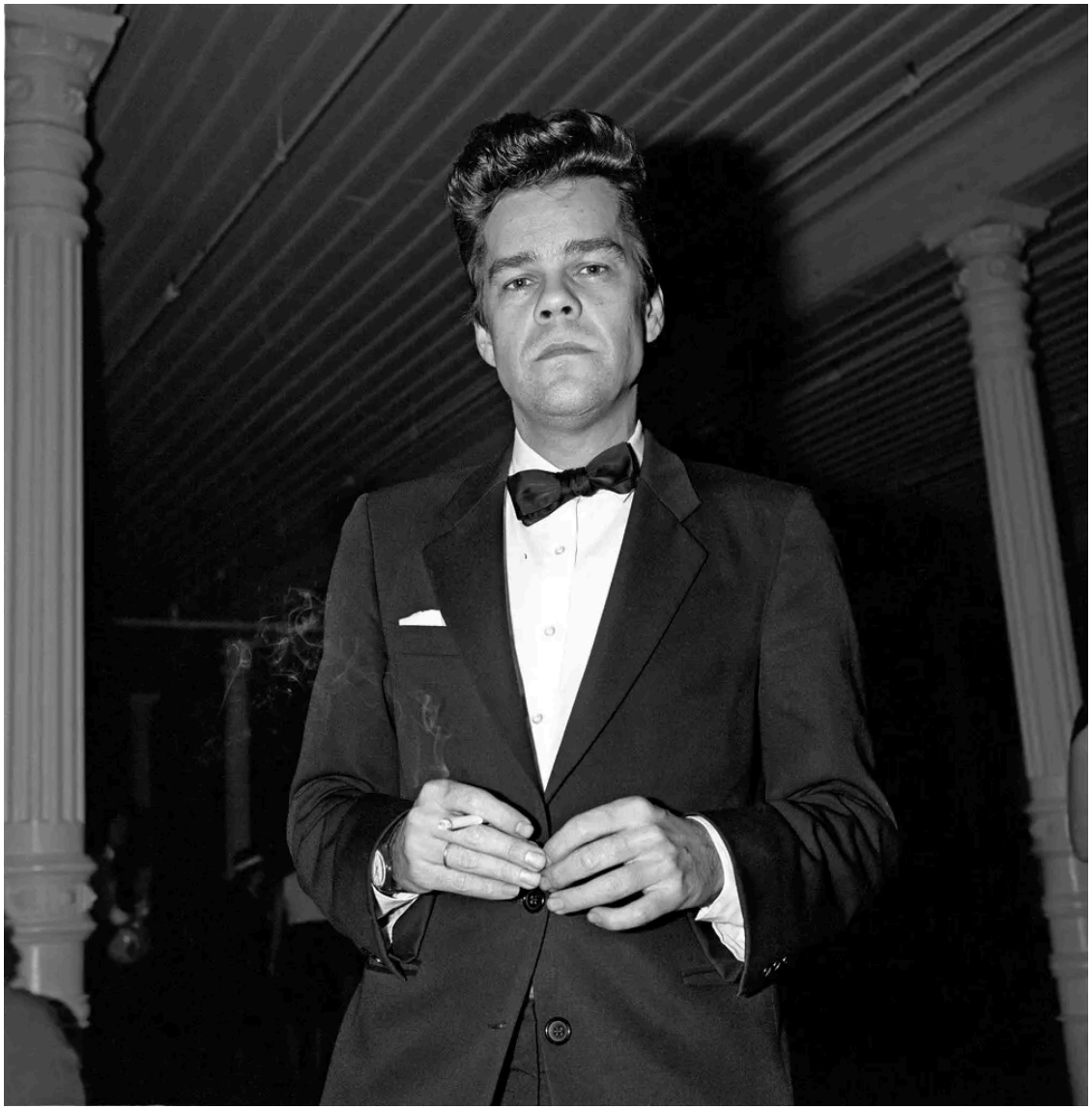
The band's debut album, produced by Todd Rundgren and called simply "The New York Dolls," was released in 1973. In Creem magazine's year-end poll, its readers named the Dolls both the best new band and the worst band. The following year brought "Too Much Too Soon," produced by Shadow Morton, famed for his work with the 1960s girl group the Shangri-Las. It sold poorly, as their first album had, and Mercury dropped the Dolls in 1975.

Malcolm McLaren briefly managed the Dolls as they began to fall apart, dressing them in red patent leather, before returning to London and managing the Sex Pistols. The New York Dolls broke up in 1975 while on tour in Florida, although Mr. Johansen and Mr. Sylvain staggered on with replacement musicians for another year.

Paul Nelson, the group's A&R man, wrote a post-mortem in the Village Voice in 1975 about their difficulties outside New York City: "In the end, they rode on real rather than symbolic subway trains to specific rather than universal places, played for an audience of intellectuals or kids even farther out than they were; and when they eventually met the youth of the country, that youth seemed more confused than captivated by them."

Mr. Johansen released five solo albums between 1978 and 1984; professional bar-band rock with bohemian flourishes, the highlights included the declamatory style anthem "Funky but Chic."

A friendship with the actor Bill Murray led to Mr. Johansen's appearance in the 1988 movie "Scrooged" as the taxicab-driving Ghost of Christmas Past. It was his most prominent role in an acting career that encompassed dozens of movies and TV shows.



Mr. Johansen in 1986 as his pompadoured alter ego, Buster Poindexter. It was in that guise that he achieved his greatest commercial success.
Karjean Levine/Getty Images

It was around this time that Mr. Johansen began cultivating the stage persona Buster Poindexter, a tuxedo-wearing crooner who specialized in jump blues and R&B party songs. Mr. Johansen made four albums as Buster Poindexter between 1987 and 1997, including the Latin-tinged "Buster's Spanish Rocketship." As Jon Pareles wrote in The Times in 1994, "What had seemed a sideline became his public musical face, often brilliant in the songs he personalized but sometimes verging on minstrelsy when he mimicked Black performers like Louis Armstrong."

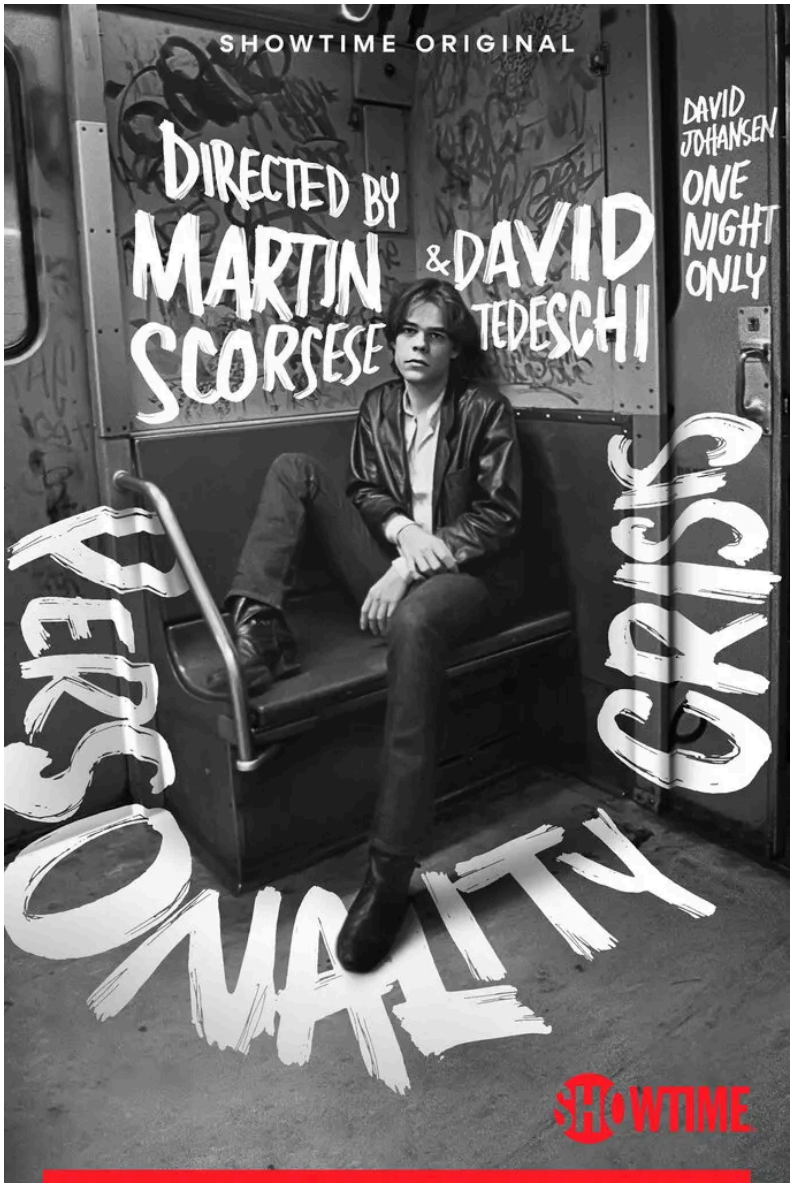
His signature cover of "Hot Hot Hot," originally recorded by the soca musician Arrow, became a party anthem and a minor hit, peaking at No. 45 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart in 1987.

He had always displayed good taste in covers, dating back to the Dolls' versions of Bo Diddley's "Pills" and Archie Bell & the Drells' "(There's Gonna Be a) Showdown." After he retired the Buster persona, he started a new group, David Johansen and the Harry Smiths, which performed songs drawn from Harry Smith's 1952 "Anthology of American Folk Music" and released albums in 2000 and 2002.

In 2004, Morrissey induced the surviving New York Dolls — Mr. Johansen, Mr. Sylvain and Mr. Kane — to reunite for two shows in London. Feeling unwell a few weeks later, Mr. Kane checked into a

hospital, was diagnosed with leukemia and died within hours. Nevertheless, Mr. Johansen and Mr. Sylvain made three more New York Dolls albums together between 2006 and 2011. Mr. Sylvain died in 2021, leaving Mr. Johansen as the last original Doll.

In addition to Ms. Hennessey, his stepdaughter, Mr. Johansen is survived by his wife, Mara Hennessey, a visual artist he married in 2013, who produced and designed many of his live shows, and five siblings: Michael, Christopher, Elizabeth and Mary Ellen Johansen and Karen Holman. He was previously married to the actress and publicist Cyrinda Foxe from 1977 to 1978 (she left him for Steven Tyler, the lead singer of Aerosmith) and to the photographer Kate Simon from 1983 to 2011.



In 2023, Mr. Johansen was the subject of “Personality Crisis: One Night Only,” a documentary centered on a Buster Poindexter show at the Café Carlyle in New York. Showtime Documentary Films; photograph by Roberta Bayley

Mr. Johansen was the subject of “Personality Crisis: One Night Only,” a 2023 documentary directed by Martin Scorsese and David Tedeschi centered on a Buster Poindexter show at the Café Carlyle in New York. “Existence is maimed happiness,” he said in the film, paraphrasing the philosopher William James — but he wasn’t able to conceal the joyful spirit and relentless productivity that animated his decades-long career. There was an irrepressible outlook that drove the New York Dolls in their evanescent moment, which Mr. Johansen applied to the rest of his long life.

“Our total attitude towards art, was, like, get up and do something — quit sitting there whining,” Mr. Johansen told The Times in 2006. “That’s what we stood for, that do-something spirit.”

The Last of the Dolls

Sylvain Sylvain of the Proto-Punk New York Dolls Dies at 69
Jan. 16, 2021

A correction was made on March 1, 2025*: An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to a fund-raising campaign to help pay Mr. Johansen’s medical bills. It was through the Sweet Relief Musicians Fund, not GoFundMe.*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

A version of this article appears in print on March 2, 2025, Section A, Page 33 of the New York edition with the headline: David Johansen, New York Doll Turned Lounge Lizard, Is Dead at 75. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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